

CALLED BY NAME

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Isaiah 43:1-7

Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, was explaining to a TV interviewer why her remarkable work has come to have such a strong grip upon the emotions of the American people. “It’s the names,” she said, “the names *are* the memorial. No edifice or structure can bring people to mind as powerfully as their names.”¹

Names are important. In the biblical tradition, names often acknowledge how someone or something is distinctive and thus how one is remembered. In Genesis, God names the things God creates to reflect their distinctive function or status: Day, Night, Sky, Earth, Seas. God orders things into existence, and the naming of created things is part of God’s authority over them.

It seems sometimes that in this digital age in which we live, we are as likely to be asked for our numbers as for our names. God doesn’t substitute numbers for names. God, through the prophet Isaiah, tells the people of Israel, “I have called you by your name, you are mine.” Isaiah speaks this word from God while the Israelites are living in exile, miles from their home, defeated, their beloved Jerusalem burned to the ground, their very existence in danger. They are not even sure who they are anymore. But: “do not fear,” [says the Lord;] “I have called you by name, you are mine.” The fact that God has named Israel makes all the difference. It is a guarantee of so much. Their name reminds the people of Israel of their divine origin, of being created and formed by God. It banishes fear and announces redemption. It offers God’s protecting hand in fire and flood. God woos Israel with a declaration of covenant love and confesses that Israel is “precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you.” In scripture, being called by one’s name is a rich gift. Names tell us who we are and whose we are.

Baptism is one of the two sacraments of the Reformed church. We always celebrate it in the midst of public worship and not privately because it is so central to who we are.

Baptism is a public naming.

“Benjamin David, Isabella Rose,” the minister says, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” He or she says a name out loud, and that’s who you are, and then, “Benjamin, Isabella, you are a child of God; you belong to Jesus Christ forever.” That’s whose you are.

And then we all remember who and whose we are by remembering our own baptism.

¹ Peter Storey, “Somebody’s Calling My Name,” *Christian Century*, December 20-27, 2000, 1332.

When he was about thirty years old, Jesus of Nazareth was baptized. We know virtually nothing about Jesus from infancy until he came to be baptized. His story, the story of his ministry, actually begins on the day he walks out of Nazareth, away from his father's carpenter shop, a few miles out into the countryside to hear a preacher by the name of John, actually a distant relative of his. John's oratory is fiery and compelling, like the legendary prophets, Amos, Micah. His message is strong: repent, turn around, devote yourself wholly to God, begin a new life, walk into the river and be baptized, let the waters wash the old away, emerge a new person.

I love to ponder the literary history of stories like this. How did it get into the New Testament? There were no disciples yet to see it and remember it. The only other witness we know was there was John the Baptist himself, and John will be imprisoned and executed by King Herod in the very near future.

So it's in there, I conclude, because Jesus remembered and told his disciples about it and the story was passed along until Mark, Matthew, and Luke wrote it down. It's in there because it was so important to Jesus himself, the day he was given a name and told to whom he belonged. It's always difficult to explain our deepest, most profound, most personal religious experience. So I've always imagined Jesus telling it something like this: Someone had asked him how it had all begun. Where did this journey start? And he must have said something like, "So there I was, standing in the crowd, listening to John, and all of a sudden my whole life passed in front of my eyes, all thirty years of it, and I was filled with a sense of anxiety and anticipation and expectation and I knew I was at a turning point, that I had to decide now what to do with the rest of my life. So for some reason I found myself walking into that river and asking John to baptize me, and he did, pushed me under the water and pulled me back up, and as I stood there a little embarrassed, feeling foolish, soaking wet, water running down my face, tears suddenly came, and it was as if the sky opened and God's Spirit—almost like a dove—came down and I heard a voice addressing me, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.'"

It was Jesus' conversion experience, the day he knew who he was and decided what to do next, the day he learned who he was and whose he was: "My Son, my child, the Beloved."

In his book, *Credo*, a collection of vignettes from the ministry of William Sloane Coffin, there is this: "What is faith? Faith is being grasped by the power of love. Faith is recognizing that what makes God is infinite mercy, not infinite control; not power but love unending."²

The story of Jesus begins on the day he is grasped by the power of love, the day he knows who he is and whose he is, the day when, in Isaiah's unforgettable image, he knows deeply in his soul that he has nothing to fear, not even death itself, because God has called him by name—"the Beloved Son"—because he belongs to God.

And so Christian faith begins in the human heart when we know that we are loved by God, not, as we think mostly, as we consider a list of intellectual propositions, analyze them objectively, turn them over in our minds, measure them against other propositions

² William Sloan Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 7.

(there is a God, there is no God; Jesus was God, Jesus was a good man; love is stronger than hate, hate seems to be winning; there is nothing to fear, there seems to be a lot to fear). Faith begins not when we decide what intellectual propositions are true for us, but when and as we know ourselves gripped by the power of love. Christian faith begins not on the day we decide to adopt a new set of rules for living, a new ethic, a new list of sins to avoid, but on the day we know who we are and whose we are: “child of God, you belong to Jesus Christ forever.”

Author Anne Lamott returned to Christian faith and the church, a little Presbyterian congregation in Marin City, California, after a very difficult and troubled life. She tells the story of her conversion in her wonderful book, *Traveling Mercies*. Lamott is an unapologetic Christian, but she has lost neither her irreverence nor her sense of the outrageous nor her salty language, and she is a bit of an anomaly to both liberals and evangelicals, which makes her compelling to everyone. She was interviewed once in an evangelical magazine about her conversion. She said,

I try to share my resurrection story with people in the hopes that some of them who have left churches or who have been kicked out because of their beliefs or sexual orientation will find something in my words or humor that makes church safe for them again. . . .’

I have never said that I am a good Christian. I just know that Jesus adores me and is only as far away as his name. I say, “Hi, Lord,” and he says, “Hello, Darling.” He loves me so much he keeps a photo of me in his wallet. If I were the only person on earth, he still would have died for me.³

One of the great saints of the Presbyterian church, Howard Rice, Professor of Theology, a former Moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly, said the same thing a little more elegantly: “The heart of the experience of God is an inner knowing that I am loved, loved beyond my comprehension, beyond my earning or deserving.” And then the professor elaborates:

God is love. The experience of God’s love is one that meets our basic need for love so that we can be free to love others. Spiritual experience is the liberation of the self from preoccupation with itself. It is the beginning of freedom to care about others with abandon.⁴

That’s what happened to Jesus one day, standing in the water of the Jordan River. He knew who he was: child of God, the Beloved, and whose he was forever. And it freed him to love with abandon, to live out his life loving his friends, his people, all he touched.

That’s why they followed him, I believe. Nondescript poor people, peasants, fishermen, tax collectors, sinners—people about whom no one ever said a good word. He gave them a new name, a new dignity: child of God, you belong to me forever.

Gripped by the power of God’s love, he and they lived and died without fear.

*Do not fear . . . ;
I have called you by name, you are mine.”*

³ Susan Olasky, “Like a Puppy in a Christmas Stocking,” *WORLD Magazine*, September 20, 2003.

⁴ Howard Rice, *Reformed Spirituality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 164-166.

Faith is being grasped by the power of love.
It is knowing who you are and whose you are.
It is to be free to love with abandon.
And, it is to be afraid of nothing: not fire, not water, nothing—not even death
itself.

At the very darkest and lowest points of his life, and there were many of them,
Martin Luther used to write on his slate two Latin words: *Baptizatus Sum*. I am baptized.
I know who I am and whose I am.

It was done for many of us before we were even aware of it: carried to the front of
the church, held in parents' arms, water spilled over our heads.

Bob, Betty, Bill, Mary, Yvette, Gary, you are a child of God and you belong to
Jesus Christ forever.

And even if you are not baptized, it is for you—it is for everyone—to have, to
know, to treasure, and to live. To love with abandon and to fear nothing, ever again.

*Do not fear . . . ;
I have called you by name, you are mine.*

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us, and blesses us with peace, be all
glory and honor forever. Amen.